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How To Prepare Your Child For First Holy Communion



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How To Prepare Your Child For First Holy Communion

**By
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Do it yourself

Please don't leave it to the Sisters. They can never do it as well as you, and certainly, not without you. They can help you, but only if you do your part first.

Your child is *your* flesh and blood, not theirs. During his first fifteen years he spends ten times as many hours at home as in church and school combined. You, his parents, are the greatest single *forming* influence in his life. You are his first, his best, his most influential teachers. You are his hero and heroine in spite of all you may hear of what "*Sister* said."

Your relationship with your child is the most important relationship in his life. The influence of your mind upon his mind, of your personality upon his personality, of your character upon his character, is greater than that of all the Sisters who will ever share in molding his spirit. You are the divinely-appointed living means of communication between God and your child.

From the time you became partners with God in bringing him into the world, your every decision has been made with him in mind. You have accepted lesser responsibilities for his welfare, why entrust to others your greatest? Why surrender to others the most exciting and satisfying joy the Lord reserved for *you*?

To form your little Christian after the pattern of Christ and to prepare him for the closest union possible with Christ in this world, is your most glorious right and privilege. Incidentally, it is also your most sacred and rewarding obligation. To accomplish it, Christ gave you at the time of your marriage, special sacramental graces: a right to all the helps you will ever need. You have only to ask for them. The Sisters receive no such sacramental graces.

Across the nation today "Do It Yourself" programs, ranging from "Toni" permanents to building a house, occupy the attention, energies and talents of our people. At the same time a national survey reveals that Catholic parents are leaving to the Sisters almost entirely the religious education of their children. In ages supposedly less enlightened (?) and less progressive (?) than our own, parents jealously guarded their almost exclusive "Do It Yourself" program of working with the Holy Spirit to develop the God-life of their little ones. It was not until the 1700's that they enlisted the *help* of the Sisters!

What visual aid can a teaching Sister use to impart a knowledge of the tremendous love and power of our Father, God, that is more effective than the Father's *liv-*

ing representative in the family, the natural father of your child? What classroom procedures or teaching techniques can more effectively enable a child to *realize, become keenly aware* of what happened to him at Baptism when Christ gave him a new life and brought him into His own family, than the experience of living that life at home in the intimacy of his natural family?

Between the ages of 2 and 5 your child adopts the fundamental attitudes which characterize his religious life. He does not come under the influence of the Sisters until he is 6. Even now, you may have to make up for lost time, *if* that is possible.

Some shrink from the task for fear of what it requires. But what does it require? Certainly not drill in Catechism definitions, memorization of prayers and a formula for confession!

The task calls for the giving of knowledge, but even more for the development of a spirit. "Intellectual schooling will be of little value if it is not accomplished by an education that takes in not only the intellect but the will and heart." (John XXIII)

Your child's sense of values, attitudes and convictions are formed more by the climate, the atmosphere in which he lives, than by cool reasoned explanations or formal classroom presentations. And that is exactly why the home is the most important school there is. From infancy your child has been catching character traits, absorbing culture, imbibing principles of life and action. His first hu-

man habits were formed in imitation of yours. Are they *Christian*?

Christian formation means letting Christ grow up in your child. To think and speak and act like Christ, to share His zeal for the praise of the Father, for the accomplishment of the Father's will and the salvation of all men is his vocation since Baptism. Gradually he must "put on the mind of the Lord Jesus Christ": see things as He sees them, put on them the value Christ puts on them. Gradually he must develop a *sense* of the supernatural, of mystery, and community. Where but in the family, the natural counterpart of the Trinity, the Family of God, can he better experience these?

Far more important than growth in knowledge of catechetical formula is growth in *interior spirit*: *faith, hope, love* and an attitude of sincerity before God. This coupled with the ability to make choices in favor of the Father, and live as the "believer" his godparents professed him to be at Baptism, can be accomplished in a School of Religion *only* when a 6-year course in Religion has been completed previously in the home and is continued throughout his school years. The parochial school and the parish school of religion are necessary *adjuncts* to the Home-School. They cannot replace it.

A few don'ts



1. Don't make the mistake of thinking or speaking about your child's *First* Holy Communion as if it were a goal. Certainly it is a decisive act in his life as a Christian but must not be a culmination. Everything in his preparation must convince him that it is the *beginning* of a life-long series of privileged moments. Speaking of the occasion as "the happiest day of his life" will give a wrong impression. Every Holy Communion should increase his happiness.

Too much emphasis on externals such as dress, pictures and gifts can dwarf the significance of subsequent Communion. Months of eager study and intensive practice in externals, of planning, dreaming of and shopping for a wardrobe, climaxed by clicking cameras and flashing bulbs as he leaves the altar rail produce an anti-climactic situation in regard to ensuing Communion.

Of course there should be special clothing but not fussy or expensive clothing. Certainly there should be a souvenir picture, and more if desired, but never should the thrill of the child's encounter with the living Christ be disrupted by flashing bulbs and distracting parents and relatives. The moment is so sacred and sublime that it should be guarded by silence of thought and action.

2. Don't connect Holy Communion with confession. If at all possible prepare him for the Sacrament of Penance and give him opportunity to receive it months in advance of his First Holy Communion. This will make it easier for him to grasp the true significance of each of these sacraments in relation to his Baptism.

3. Don't give a wrong impression of Christ's Presence in the Eucharist by telling him not to chew the Host for fear of "hurting Jesus". Above all, don't tell untrue stories or give threats that the Sacred Host will bleed if received unworthily.

4. Don't suggest that he may have difficulty swallowing the Host, or in any other way, give him cause to fear. The experience must be for him a joyous one which he will want to repeat often.

5. Don't give your child the heretical notion that Jesus comes to us in Holy Communion as a reward for being good. He will never be good enough to receive Jesus but will need Him all his life.

6. Don't speak of being "*alone* with Jesus" after receiving Communion or give the impression that receiving



Holy Communion is merely a personal experience with no relation to the Communion of others. It is well to teach him to "bury his face in his hands" and tell Jesus how much he loves Him, to thank Him for coming and share with Him the secrets of his heart. But teach also that he is closer to all other Christians when Jesus comes to him and gives him more power to love them.

7. Don't tell him to close his eyes when receiving. Such a practice makes it impossible for the priest to get his attention if he needs to be directed to open or close his mouth. It can result in an accident that is upsetting for the priest and your child. It is well to tell him not to look up at the priest at the moment of Communion and to keep his eyes down when returning to his place. This external helps to prevent distractions and to maintain a prayerful and reverential attitude.

8. When you tell stories from the Bible don't emphasize unimportant and even imagined details so that the religious truth is obscured, e.g., in telling the story of Adam and Eve, don't make so vivid the tree with its fruit and the "snake" that tempted Eve, that your child's fancy is caught in these trivialities and he fails to grasp the import of the tremendous loss of sanctifying grace by a single act of disobedience. When you tell the story of Christ's Nativity don't embellish your account with depths of snow, icicles on the cave and meanness of Inn proprietors so that the truth, God so loved people He became One of them, is lost in a maze of untruth. When you speak of

Christ's sufferings and death for us don't emphasize "they beat Him 5000 times". The truth is we don't know how many times Christ was whipped but how horrible that God should be chastised even once by His own creatures!

Above all, don't burden your child's memory and imagination with legends such as the sprouting of Joseph's rod as God's indication of His choice of a husband for Mary, the consecration of Mary as a Temple virgin at the age of three, and the names of the "kings" who visited the Infant. Pamphlets slightly larger than this, and costing a few cents more, will give you the benefit of the best Biblical scholarship and research. Do avail yourself of them and teach your child only the truth.

9. Don't clutter your home with a wealth of sentimental religious articles that give your child an unattractive and false view of religion. If you expect him to develop a deep and strong faith in and love for Jesus, Mary and angels, don't decorate your walls with pictures that depict the awesome and powerful cherubim of Scripture as sweet little cupids, God Incarnate as a "pretty girl", and His Mother as a convenient vase for your favorite plant.

10. Don't reduce God to the level of man only in order to make Him comprehensible to your child. Your child has more sense of mystery than you. Develop your own and his.



A few do's

1. Pray to the Holy Spirit for guidance.
2. Remember that it is a *long-range* and *everyday* program. It cannot be completed in a few months of feverish activity. It should begin as soon as your child is capable of receiving sense impressions.
3. Be aware of the fact that you teach more by what you *are* and *do* than by what you say. Fundamental attitudes of faith and love will grow in your child gradually if he sees you face the realities of life in a faithful and loving manner. From your values, goals, and reactions to all that happens each day, he will learn the Christian attitude towards life: it is not meant to *satisfy* but to *transform*. He will learn what it means to have been called by God (in Baptism) to be His own and to live with His life.

4. Because children learn more through moods, sights, sounds and activities than by reasoning and reciting, provide religious experiences in the home frequently. In the morning and evening trace the Sign of the Cross on his forehead and remind him that he belongs to Christ. When he is able to draw the Sign on himself explain that by so doing he admits that he belongs to Jesus and places himself under His power. Keep a filled holy water font in his bedroom and explain the use of holy water in making the Sign of the Cross as a renewal of his Baptism.

These and other ritual gestures, such as his father's parental blessing, kissing the Bible, "God's holy Book", observing silence for a moment or two "to think with our Father, God," coupled with attitudes of faith and reverence, gradually accustom him to their use and prepare him for the greatest contact with God in the Eucharist. Properly used, they help to develop the sense of *mystery* so essential to appreciation of the Eucharist.

Noise and nervous excitable activity is at least as great a reason for modern man's loss of a sense of mystery as is the tremendous extent of visualization. The sacred must always be protected by silence. Gradually accustom the young child to short periods of quiet during which he learns to sense God's Presence and to commune with our Father, God. The mood for silent exchange with God is brought about by your own calm, gentle manner as you speak of God, a subdued tone which is gradually hushed to a whisper, and a suggestion to think with God. God

doesn't use voice or words when He speaks to us. He puts thought in our minds.

Moods akin to the liturgical season or feast should be enjoyed by the child. You will find much help in the splendid pamphlets and full-size books describing traditional customs and family celebrations of seasons and feasts.

5. To develop a sense of *community* and *belonging* to God's people, tell the child stories from the Bible that relate God's dealings with His people thousands of years ago: God's choice of a people of His own (Call of Abraham), His love for them and promise to them ("You shall be My people and I shall be your God"), His coming to live with them as Man (Annunciation and Nativity), His teaching and living (Public Life), His dying and bringing Himself back to life for His people (Passion, Resurrection, Ascension), His starting a Church, His Kingdom on earth (Call of the Apostles, Coming of the Holy Spirit, Appointment of Peter, early preaching, Baptism), through which He continues to live and act for His people today.

Be careful to tell stories from the Bible in terms of Salvation history: God manifesting Himself to people, dealing with them and redeeming them. If they are told as isolated stories, there is a danger that children tend to classify them with stories similar to *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Accepting them as "holy stories" or stories with a pious coloring robs the child of just pride and joy in his Christian heritage and belief in and love for the

Word of God.

Be natural in your approach, e.g., relate Scripture events at the time they are being celebrated: Birth of Our Lord at Christmas, passion during Lent and passiontide, Resurrection at Easter, and so forth. Gradually help him to understand that Christ *lives* today and *acts* out the same events in people. He is born in them at Baptism, and lives and grows in them.

6. In telling stories from the Bible, e.g., the deliverance of the Hebrews from Egypt, do more than impress your child with the truth that God worked wonders for His people. *He constantly came to them through things.* He came to Moses in the burning bush. He made the Hebrews into His own people by bringing them safely through the Red Sea. Water had long been recognized as the first created source of life. (See the account of Creation in Genesis and note that it is water and the Spirit of God that made life fruitful.) It was water and the Spirit of God, Who went with His People in the column of *cloud* and the pillar of *fire*, that welded the Hebrews into the people of God. In Baptism it is a bath of water and the Spirit Who gives life, that makes us into God's people today. *God still comes to His people through things.* He lives and acts in us today and continues to make us holy.

For His closest union with us He chose a meal of bread and wine. A meal is a family ceremony. It is a communion, union with one's table companions, in sharing not only the same food but also minds and hearts. Every

celebration includes a meal which brings about warmth, mutual love and joy in each other's company.

By receiving Communion, we enter into the closest union possible with Jesus and all the members of His family. Each Communion is a pledge of the final, never-ending embrace. God truly comes to us under the appearances of bread and wine and prepares us little by little for the face-to-face vision.

7. This will be more comprehensible to your child if you are careful from the beginning to avoid sentimental presentations of "Baby Jesus." When Christ was a Baby, He was Baby Jesus; but He became an adult. Even from his second Christmas your child should learn: Jesus didn't stay a Baby. He grew big and strong and handsome. He died on a cross, but He came back to life. He went to heaven and now He is alive forever. He lives on in heaven as King of heaven and earth. And He lives on in each of His people. How? It's a secret. God's secret. It's a mystery.

8. Begin now, if you didn't on your wedding night or have lapsed since making a good beginning, to have some form of family prayer each evening. It need not be the Rosary. It can be night prayers adapted to the ability of the children. It can be recitation of the Psalms or any other form on which you agree.

9. Have a regular Bible story hour at least twice a week. As the children grow older this feature can develop into a family religious discussion.



Take your child to Mass

Make Sunday Mass a family affair. The sooner the young child is taken to Church the better. It is wise to take the toddler for a visit and tour of the Church previous to his first Sunday attendance. This offers opportunity to explain much and satisfy his healthy curiosity without disturbing the congregation more than is necessary. When you show him the statues of "Jesus' Mommy" and St. Joseph, the baptismal font, confessionals, sanctuary lamp and other furniture, speak in a whisper and explain that we do not talk out loud in Church because it is God's House and we want to hear Him speak. He speaks without words. He puts thoughts in our minds.

When you show your little child the Tabernacle and explain that Jesus lives behind the gold door be ready to answer his question: "How can He fit in there?" He is God. God is all-powerful. He can do anything He wants to do. So that people would love Him, He became a little Baby. His Mother and St. Joseph could hold Him in their arms. So could the shepherds and Wise Men. When He grew up children could sit in His lap and He could put His Hand on their heads and bless them.

But Jesus loves you and me even more. He loves us so much, He wants to come right inside of us. So He gave Father (name local priest) power to change bread and wine into Himself. Every day Father changes bread and wine into Jesus. When Daddy and I (or Mother and I) receive Jesus He looks like a piece of Bread. He tastes like Bread too. But we know It is Jesus because He said so. When you are big enough you will be able to receive Jesus too.

9. Give your little one a child's book with colored pictures of Jesus to take with him to Church and vary the books often enough to keep his interest. When he is ready, give him one of the attractive new children's missals.

10. Gradually, week by week, prepare him to participate in the Mass, externally as well as interiorly. Explain that Father is giving him a very special wish every time he says: *The Lord be with you, Dominus vobiscum.* Wouldn't you like to make the same wish for Father

(name local priest)? Teach him to respond in Latin: *And with you too, Et cum spiritu tuo.*

Another Saturday evening explain that Father will say many prayers the next day asking for special blessings and gifts of God. Ask: Do you want some more God-beauty and God-brightness (sanctifying grace) inside of you too? At the end of Father's prayer then, say, "Me too! It's my prayer too, Lord." Father will give us a signal so we'll know it's our turn to speak. He'll say: *per omnia saecula saeculorum*, and we will say in Latin, *Amen.*

At another time tell the story of Jesus' cure of the ten lepers, or the blind men, or any other you choose, in which people in trouble asked Jesus to be kind to them. Talk with your child about hard it is to be good. It's hard for every one to be good, even the priest. We all need Jesus' help. The priest asks for it in every Mass. He says the same prayer the lepers, or the blind men said: *Lord, have mercy on us.* Father doesn't ask for help for himself alone. He asks for Jesus' help for all God's people. He says: Have mercy on *us*. God's people say the same prayer with their priest. Together, all God's people pray it in Greek, *Kyrie eleison.* We pray it in Latin too, *Christe eleison.* Practice the litany with the children, Daddy taking the part of the priest and the rest of the family being the congregation.

The occasion of receiving a letter from Grandma or some other loved one may be used for a discussion of let-

ters and how much they mean to us.' It is easy then to speak of Jesus' friends after He went back to heaven. His closest friends were the Bishops of His Church. They often wrote long letters to the other friends, God's people, reminding them of different ways in which they could show love for each other. When the people came together on Sunday to praise God, the priests read the letter to them.



Jesus says: "Believe Me. Trust Me." Other times He says: "Love one another as I have loved you."

Before hearing our King's message, we draw His Sign on our forehead, lips and heart with our thumb. As we draw the Sign of the Cross we think: "Jesus, help me to understand Your message, to tell it to others, and to love it." After we hear our King's message, we say: *Praise to You, O Christ, Laus Tibi, Christe.*

Christmas is a convenient time for teaching the birthday song of the angels, repeated in Sunday Masses except during penitential seasons. A natural conclusion to the story of what happened on the hillside that night, when the angels appeared to the shepherds, is to teach the words of the song: *Glory to God in the highest*, said by our priest in Latin, *Gloria in excelsis deo*. We want to praise God with the angels and our priest. So we join him when he says: *and on earth peace to men of good will, et in terra pax hominibus bonae voluntatis.*

Subsequent feasts of rejoicing such as Easter, Pentecost, and the feast of Christ the King may be the occasions for learning more of the Gloria: *We praise Thee, we bless Thee, we adore Thee, we glorify Thee. Laudamus te. Benedicimus te. Adoramus te. Glorificamus te.* The child will love it if you teach these as a series of praises, or compliments, piling one on top of the other with added intensity in the voice as well as mind and heart.

•Once the child understands that Jesus grew to manhood, died, was buried and brought Himself back to life, stayed

with His friends for forty days and then went back to His Father in heaven, he is ready for the story of the Last Supper and the *essential meaning* of the Mass. A birthday or other gift-giving time is a favorable one. After discussing why we love to give and receive gifts, turn attention to our Father in heaven. He loves to receive gifts too. But what would He want? The child is generous usually in his desires to give his candy and most cherished toys but should be reassured that our Father would have no use for any of these.

Truly, we have no gift that is good enough for our Father. That's why our Big Brother, Jesus, said "Take Me. Let Me be your gift." Show the crucifix to your child and talk with him of how Jesus *let* the men nail Him to the cross because He wanted to prove how much He loves us, how expensive God-beauty in us is, how terrible sin is. But you and I weren't there that day. We couldn't say: "Take Jesus, Father. He's our Gift." So Jesus found a way that we, His people, could keep on giving Him to His Father, hundreds and thousands of years after He had gone back to heaven.

Tell the story of the Last Supper emphasizing the words of Consecration: "This *is* My Body." Instantly, It is the living Jesus. He really and truly comes on the altar during Mass. Teach him to look up at the Host and say: "My Lord and My God," and at the Chalice and say "My Jesus mercy," but above all teach him to offer Jesus to our





Father as our Gift. Because we are baptized, this is our special privilege. To help deepen this impression you might put the Crucifix in a gift box while you talk about the way Jesus comes on the altar (under the appearances of bread and wine), and allow him to help you wrap it. On Sunday before leaving for Church show him the box and remind him that all are going to offer a Gift to our Father, the Best Gift possible.

Some time later, when you are certain that he is aware of Gift-giving when he goes to Sunday Mass, it would be well to have a discussion on why Jesus is so pleasing to His Father. Of course, because He is God. But also, because He did always what His Father wanted. Next to Jesus, our Father loves us best. He wants us to give ourselves, with Jesus, to do His Will.

When we think or say with our priest: "Father in heaven, I give You Jesus for my gift," we should add: "And I give You myself. I will be obedient, kind, pure, honest and truthful to please You." You might have each member of the family put a picture of himself, or a baptismal candle, or other symbol for himself in the gift box with the Crucifix to deepen the impression of the truth that we give ourselves with Jesus. During the week, remind him in a pleasing way, of the consecration he made and help him to live it.

And so, gradually, over a period of years, through instruction, observation and participation your child will come to participate in and live the Mass.

Let him see both of you go to the Communion Rail to receive Holy Communion, if possible during every Mass you attend, so that he will learn more effectively that Holy Communion is the completion of the Mass and that it is proper to receive Communion during every Mass. Up to the time of his First Holy Communion his participation in the Mass is only partial. First Communion will bring about his full participation in the Mass. In the meantime he may be prepared to tell Jesus how much he Wants Him to come to him, and to long for His coming.

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